



# PRAVAHINI

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## SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

One hears so much and reads so often in the media about sexual harassment of women in various situations, but strangely not in the workplace. One cannot be so naïve even to wonder whether it does not exist. Obviously it has not surfaced for many reasons and the media has never made sensational news of it or advocated precautionary measures against it. It is in all probability a silent canker thriving by this very fact, while victims suffer the manifold consequences.

Nevertheless the general public is vaguely, perhaps, aware of the sexual harassment that is widespread in workplaces such as the garment factories. Here the victims are a very vulnerable lot being young women from villages ignorant of this lurking danger. Clearer and more definite facts have come to light when occasional researchers happen to go into their closed community. But complaints or punishments are almost unheard of at an official level due to fear of retaliation from various quarters.

Sexual harassment in public and private transport services especially in the towns is so common that any bus traveler will have stories of such encounters. But have they ever complained? To whom do they complain anyway? Given the packed buses especially at peak rush hours even school children have complained of sexual harassment.

In large mercantile offices, banks and the like such harassment stories leak out in undertones.

Sexual harassment has been defined as unwelcome sexual advances including physical contact, a demand on request for sexual favours,

sexually coloured remarks and verbal or non verbal conduct of a sexual nature. It is in short, conduct that is unwanted by the recipient. Investigations proclaim that it will be a rare work place that has no such harassment nor is it a new problem for women employees. At the workplace it can become a severe strain on the victim leading to stress and depression if there is no relief available. In fact it can lead to more serious situations such as loss of job, loss of motivation, anxiety and suicide. On the other hand the work place can lose much in the way of damage to the good name of the institution with disastrous results. In Sri Lanka as in many Asian countries the incidence of sexual harassment is not available in statistics unlike in some western countries. However the Penal Code (amendment) act No. 22 of 1995 puts in place a law which if enacted would tackle this problem. Yet the problem in our social milieu would be to elicit official complaints. In the Sri Lankan background reason for this paucity of complaints would range from fear of humiliation and of being the subject of gossip, of reprisals from the harasser to distrust of the management. Colleagues who would sympathise personally with a victim may not stand by her when a complaint is official. The management it is generally felt tends to ridicule the incident rather than search for the basis of the complaint. The situation as it is presents a rather negative picture. Complaints at an official level are not forthcoming from women who may be victims of sexual harassment while managements of

workplaces are likely to ignore the whole issue, and prefer to let it remain unrecognised.

With increasing numbers of women going into employment it is high time for this problem to receive more serious attention. Sexual harassment has been deemed a criminal offence by law and Sri Lanka having ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the position of employees, employers and the state should be put in place.

In the interests of the women they should be 'educated' and made aware of their rights and the laws that will protect them. Managements on the other hand should be ready to take the responsibility if there is any complaint. It is their duty to make workplaces safe for its employees, particularly women. A code of discipline could be issued to employees incorporating a system by which complaints could be judged. Sexual harassment could then be treated as a disciplinary offence in the first place. The fact that the issue is recognised by the organisation would, to a great extent, be effective in upholding its own moral standard.

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## *International Women's Day*

**I**nternational Women's Day celebrated each year on March 8, remains as a vibrant day in the women's calendar. Women's organisations have continued their struggle against the many aspects of women's lives that still keep them burdened with problems that have subjected them in every sphere of human activity to less than their rightful place as counterparts of men. Basic "human rights" are still denied to them in practice almost excluding women from the "human race" Why else have they to fight for "women's rights" which are no more no less than "human rights"?

International Women's Day has certainly helped to create in the general public an awareness of women's issues. They are slowly but surely coming to realise that the same women whom they took for granted in the past are now well aware of the rights they have always had but have been denied. Women have come in to their own. Women activists have emerged to lead them out of the shadow of willing and unwilling submission.

Here in Sri Lanka International Women's Day is approached with much enthusiasm by Women's organisations especially and the women folk they work with. The impact is seen in the large number of rural women who are being co-opted into these activities. They have realised that through self empowerment, education, economic independence they could find their own place - a way out of poverty and a way into gender equity. Gender awareness is certainly on the

increase for men and the subordinate position of women has been recognised as a worldwide phenomenon. In Sri Lanka the State has found the necessity to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs acknowledging that women's affairs are desperately in need of special recognition in a social milieu which is based on a patriarchal background. Problems of women have been systematically brought into the limelight galvanising authorities to take action. Violence against women in different forms is being attacked. Gender discrimination, gender violence, domestic violence and sexual harassment are burning issues, rampant in our society yet so well kept under cover. The National Committee on Women has established a Centre for Gender complaints where assistance by way of legal advice is made available. The public are coming face to face with the 'other half of the population' which have hardly had any say in their own affairs. Men and women are being made knowledgeable on the gross indignities suffered by such categories as Sri Lanka women workers in foreign countries, women factory workers in our local Free Trade Zones, the silent submissive women in homes where domestic violence is a part of life.

If Women's Day could create even a slightly conscience stricken public, women's efforts would not have been a vain endeavour. For, women who come together on Women's Day with their slogans, banners and processions besides workshops, lecturers and seminars, it is an act of reaffirmation that they have goals to reach and mean to reach them.

### *From the UN Secretary General's*

#### *Message on International Women's Day 2001*

"It is one of the tragic features of modern conflict that women and girls suffer its impact increasingly and disproportionately. They are neither the initiators nor the prosecutors of conflicts, and yet they have been specifically targeted, often as a way to humiliate the adversary and break the morale and resistance of whole societies. Steps have been taken to end the culture of impunity surrounding this lamentable practice — both at the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and in the adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. We must build further on that work.

And we must do more. As the resolution adopted by the Security Council makes clear, we must address the issue of women, peace and security on several fronts. While women are often the first victims of armed conflict, they must also be recognized as a key to the solution. We must strive to integrate women more effectively in peace processes worldwide.

It is increasingly realized that women possess particular skills and experiences that enable them to contribute to all stages of a peace process. In times of conflict, it is often women who take over the running of homes, farms and villages. Women understand the root causes of tension and know which power groups within communities and countries are most likely to support peace initiatives. Women are able to work together and communicate across barriers and divides.

We must make greater use of that potential. We must ensure that these experiences are replicated at all levels, in national and international arenas. We must build partnerships among all actors — governments, non-governmental organizations, community groups and the private sector — to bring more women to the negotiating table and into decision-making positions. We must act on the understanding that women's full participation in preventing and resolving conflicts is essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security in the twenty-first century. On this International Women's Day of 2001, let that be our credo for a more peaceful millennium."

WERC Executive Director, Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran was offered a Fellowship at the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Relations at the University of British Columbia. Her assignment as a visiting scholar was for two months, March and April 2001.

During this period she had undertaken a research programme on the Diasporic Writings of Tamil Women and made a presentation at the centre on the findings of the research. She was also made a member of the committee of South Asian Gender Research set up by the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Relations. On behalf of WERC she had presented the Centre with a few of the publications on Sri Lankan women.

While in Vancouver she was invited by York University, Manitoba for lectures and discussions with advanced students on topics related to Gender Relations in the Third World.

The faculty of International Development Studies of the York University was due to celebrate a gala event at this time. Two new undergraduate programmes had been recently approved by their faculty of Arts "the South Asian Studies programme" and the "International Development Studies Programme". This achievement for which they had worked hard, was celebrated in order "to cheer the new initiatives on". On this occasion, doing the Sri Lanka women proud, the Faculty invitation to its members read "and to help us in our celebration, we have the good fortune to welcome as a guest speaker Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran, noted Sri Lanka feminist scholar, publisher and founder of the pan-ethnic WERC of Sri Lanka."

The presentation and discussion made by Dr. Thiruchandran was entitled "Feminism and Ethnicity in the Third World with Special Emphasis on the Organisation and Working of WERC in the Sri Lankan context".

### **Sexual Harassment of Tamil Women**

#### **A Statement from WERC Staff**

Violence against women has increased in Sri Lanka as everywhere else. However, it is also increasingly reported, thanks to the women's organisations, and the increasing articulation of a political consciousness by our women. It is completely disheartening and demoralising to realise that the representatives of the state in uniform perform these heinous acts of violence. Women's sexuality has become dangerously vulnerable in times of conflict.

Sexual harassment by the soldiers is increasingly taking place although the incidents are not officially reported. We understand that due to fear of public opinion which ostracizes sexually harassed women the women do not come forward to admit the fact. Rape of women while in custody, in the metropolis is a dangerous trend.

Prevention is more important than punishment in this situation, although punishment for such crimes is essential. These brutal crimes are committed by the power of the uniform, the physical body and the ethnicity of the majoritarian group on powerless bodies of women. These incidents lead to a demoralising situation in civil society. Officers of the security forces and the police should be educated on how to deal with unarmed sexually vulnerable members of civil society. A new code of ethics for the security forces is necessary to halt society's loss of confidence in all that is moral, right and just. The conscience of civil society must be aroused to these horrendous acts.

### **Domestic Violence**

#### **The Draft Act at a glance**

How it will help the victims: Formulated to recognise a women's right to live a life free from all forms of violence, the Act will provide criminal, civil and constitutional remedies through -

- **Interim Protection Orders** - These would provide short-term protection to a woman from threatened or further violence. It forbids access of an abuser to his victim. It is given in an emergency context where there is a possibility that the woman will be subject to abuse. It should serve as an easily accessible and immediate remedy against violence.
- **Protection Orders** - these are permanent orders that direct the abuser to stop the violence as with Interim Protection Orders.
- **Warrant of Arrest** - this is a warrant of arrest issued where a Protection Order is breached.
- **Other forms of Relief** - these range from compensation payments, access to the family home and payment for punitive damages. Orders could also be sought for the police to seize any weapons that the abuser may have in his possession. Payment of emergency monetary relief would also be important to sustain a woman who wishes to stay away from her abuser, and to protect her from her abuser withholding funds to which she is otherwise entitled.

- Drafted by Women and Media Collective -

**ELISABETH REHN, ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF AND VICTORIA BRITAIN TO CHART PROGRESS OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN AFFECTED BY CONFLICT**

*- UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women 2002 Report to Explore Emerging Issues in Women's Experiences of War, Peace building and Conflict Resolution -*

United Nations, New York - Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), today announced the appointment of two independent experts, Elisabeth Rehn (Finland) and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia), to spearhead the organization's efforts to assess progress of the world's women, particularly those affected by conflict. Heyzer also announced that Victoria Brittain (UK), internationally acclaimed correspondent and Associate Foreign Editor of the Guardian has agreed to document the findings of Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf for Progress 2002.

*Progress of the World's Women 2002*, scheduled for release next Fall, will focus on the issue of women, peace and security. The first edition of *Progress of the World's Women* was launched in June 2000 and focused on the economic dimensions of women's lives.

"The issues at stake are enormous," Heyzer said. "Armed conflict affects women and girls differently from men and boys. These gender dimensions continue to be ignored. *Progress 2002* will demonstrate that it is impossible to talk about effective humanitarian responses or inclusive peace processes without taking gender into account."

The Independent Experts will consult with women from war-torn communities, as well as with human rights, humanitarian, development and women's organizations. The first field visit is planned to Colombia in June, followed by Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, East Timor, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Somalia.

"We intend to send an unambiguous message to the predators who continue to rape, exploit, torture and mutilate women and girls in conflict situations," stated Johnson Sirleaf.

"Women are rarely protected from these threats," said Elisabeth Rehn, "Warlords have been given more access than women to the negotiating table. In significant measure, what has been happening to women is the strongest reason for the Security Council's recent focus on their protection in armed conflict and their participation in peace processes."

*Progress of the World's Women 2002* will develop indicators to measure progress for women affected by conflict. "Ultimately," said Heyzer, "our goal is to mobilise international support for the highest possible standards for women's protection and for their increased participation in peace building."

(From - UNIFEM Press Room)

**The Millenium Peace Prize for Women 2001**

This new international award is sponsored by the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the London based human rights organization International Alert.

The award is the first of its kind to recognise women's special role in peace making. It is in fact an acknowledgement of the part that women have played in supporting democratic principles such as equality between sexes, ethnic groups and religions. The Executive Director of UNIFEM has said "The Millenium Peace Prize for Women says to the world that it is time we recognised women as equal partners in peace building, and in all other political and economic realms."

Says the Executive Director of International Alert, "large numbers of women must be invited to shape peace negotiations. What vision of peace can we expect if only half the population is included in the process."

Of the 106 winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, which has been awarded since 1901 only 10 have been women or women's organisations.

Arriving on 4<sup>th</sup> March for the launch of the Prize this year will be the six individuals/ organisations from around the world, the unsung heroines who have helped to transform war into peace in their homelands.

On March 7<sup>th</sup> they are to be hosted to a gala dinner organised by celebrity chefs each preparing a special "Recipe for Peace" entrée or dessert.

Winners will receive a statue designed by sculptor Jim Holmes, who is famous for his statues commemorating the massacre at Tianamen Square.

**Award winners**

Flora Brovina (Kosovo)  
Asma Jahangir and Hina Jilani (Pakistan)  
Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency (Papua New Guinea)  
Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres (Colombia)  
Veneranda Nzambazamariya (Rwanda)  
Stasa Zajovic from Belgrade, on behalf of Women in Black



## Gender Implications of Globalization

Globalization means many things to many people. At its simplest, it is about footloose corporations taking investment wherever labour is cheapest and most productive, and it is about the growing plight of unskilled labour. Much of the world's cheap labour is female, and in the case of Asia, much of the export-led economic boom of the past decade has literally been on the backs of women. (Interestingly, recent research by Diane Elson and others suggests that countries such as Pakistan - where women have been less able to enter the workforce - have been less able to seize growth opportunities presented by trade liberalization than have those such as Bangladesh - where thousands of women have entered factories producing garments for export). This rapid growth has provided many new jobs for women. They are badly paid, working conditions are not good and there are few if any benefits and rights for workers, but at least it is better than existing alternatives, and undoubtedly, life has been better for many Asian women and their families as a result of rapid growth. However, women's hold on these jobs can be short lived as capital moves on when ever it needs to in order to find even cheaper labour and to maximize profits. There are many examples of companies such as NIKE moving from country to country and leaving thousands of women unemployed. Wages are driven to a minimum with the result that there are startling statistics such as that of NIKE which pays Michael Jordan more to advertise its products than it pays its entire South East Asian workforce in one year.

## UNIFEM Uses Women's social and Economic Rights Locally to confront Globalisation

In response to the drastic changes wrought by globalization and neo-liberal adjustment in Latin America, the UNIFEM-Andean Region has taken on women's social and economic rights as one of its top priorities. Under this framework, the First Andean Regional Workshop on Social and Economic Rights was held in Peru to train experts to apply global social and economic rights to their local contexts and participants developed Action Plans to implement in their communities. One important result was the signing of an accord between UNIFEM and Villa el Salvador, an outlying municipality of Lima. The municipality has agreed to perform a gender-sensitive budget analysis and it is hoped that other municipalities in the region will soon follow suit. Plans are already underway with municipalities in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

(From - UNIFEM Press Room)

## Women's Art

Three women artists representing the country's multi ethnic society presented their work at an exhibition held in March this year. It was organised by Women and Media Collective as part of their Women's Day activities. Vasuki Jeyshankar, Padma Rajapaksha and Muditha Askin are women involved with the welfare of women who portrayed in their works the challenge of being women.

## Women's Voices

A British author and lecturer at the Open University, London, Olga Kenyon was on holiday in Sri Lanka recently. Realising that the "wonderful tradition of women's letter writing" had not received any attention in the literary world, she decided to write a book which "catalogues the growth of a woman through different letters", entitled "Women's Voices- Their lives and loves through 2000 years of letters". It is a collection of letters written by women including Queen Victoria, Jane Austen, Czarina Alexandra, Florence Nightingale, Mary Queen of Scots and Virginia Woolf and letters dating back to 200BC.

## Women Writing

Vijitha Fernando's Women Writing is a collection of translations of 25 women writers' books in Sinhala. This aspect of Women writing translations is seen as a welcome angle for women's studies. Vijitha Fernando well known as a versatile translator inter-alia, has brought to the English reading public and the foreigners, a close encounter with the Sri Lanka women writers in the Sinhala Medium.

## Woman Journalist

The Mervyn de Silva award for the best journalist of the year 2000 went to the woman journalist of the Sunday Leader - Sonali Samarasinghe. She wins this prestigious award for the second year in the succession. An outstanding example for all women and men, we extend to her our warm congratulations.

### National Conference

#### Women and Labour

The 3<sup>rd</sup> biennial National Conference (Sinhala), organized by WERC, was held at the WERC auditorium on May 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

The theme of this conference was Women and Labour.

An encouraging feature was the response from the invitees. The participants comprising University, lecturers, University Students. Media personnel, NGO representatives filled the auditorium to capacity.

Before the commencement of the first session Tharanga de Silva (WERC) welcomed the guests and then called on the WERC Executive Director Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran to make the inaugural speech. Introducing WERC and its activities to the participants Mrs. Thiruchandran went on to comment on our commitment to gender issues with special reference to the theme of the two day conference. She requested those present to keep in touch with our organisation and to make use of the facilities we provide especially the library with its large volume of material on gender issues.

The key note address was made Ms. Subhangi Herath, senior lecturer of Department of Social Science, University of Colombo, on the topic Women, Occupation and Service. Highlighting the many problems faced by women who are employed, she stressed the value of their service, which is grossly under valued in this country.

Papers were presented by several university lecturers, an Attorney at Law and Researchers. Their presentations were based on researches carried out by them and included problems of Domestic Aides, Female Workers on tea estates, Law relating to women and labour.

Discussions followed and an exchange of ideas and experiences evoked much interest.

The final session was the appointment of a Committee to formulate a draft memorandum. It was agreed to highlight the problems women in employment faced along with suggestions for action that could bring relief. This document would be submitted to HE the President as well as other relevant authorities.

### Workshop for Women Police Officers

Organised by WERC, this workshop was held on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2001 as part of our Women's Day activities.

It was conducted at the Police Headquarters Higher Training Institute, Fort.

The objectives of the workshop focussed on

- awareness of the legal situation with regard to women,
- the necessity of basic counselling knowledge and
- special procedures required for dealing with abused women.

The participants comprised 29 police officers selected from the crime branches of several areas.

The four resource persons Ms. Rocky Ariyaratne, Ms. Priyanthi Ganegoda, Ms. Nandanie Patabendige and DIG Chandra Fernando provided very instructive lectures.

The subjects included Women and Law with special reference to Acts applicable to Women and the practical use of law, Counselling in Police investigations and Self Esteem of Police Officers.

At the end of the workshop an evaluation was done and a questionnaire based on the workshop completed.

Suggestions submitted by participants included -

- > Similar workshops to be held at regional centres,
- > Workshop should be of a longer duration,
- > Follow-up programmes to find out the effects of the workshops on their work,
- > School prefects and senior students be made ware of women's legal rights,
- > Male police officers too should be given similar training.



## Workshop on Gender Sensitisation Integrating Gender into Teacher Training Programmes

This residential workshop which was organised by WERC was held at Club Palm Garden, Beruwala, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 2001. It was conducted by Ms. Kamla Bhasin a women's activist from New Delhi.

The main focus of the workshop was on the Education Sector, as teachers come in contact with children and the concept of gender could be carried to a wide circle.

The majority of participants were selected from the Pasdunrata College of Teacher Education, and a few others from different schools. Among them there were a Vice principal and a Girl Guide Commissioner.

The facilitator outlined the form the workshop would take as follows

A period for 'reflections' which comprised the participants views and thoughts on the previous days programme, a period of 'Explanation' which took the form of a basic analysis of the theme, a period for presentations of Group work involving participatory exercises.

Themes included the following

- What is gender, throwing emphasis on the biological definition and the socio-cultural one. Gender division of work and gender relationships as power relationships, were important aspects.
- Patriarchy or male domination was recognised as a social system which considers men superior to women, thereby setting up a vicious circle of discrimination.
- Feminism which is the challenge to patriarchy; it is through education that women can be empowered to meet this challenge.

Relevant to the themes were the films shown 'A Leaf and a Thorn' and 'Daughters of History' adding interest to a new understanding of feminism.



## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Jawa, Raschita

**GIRL CHILD LABOUR.** New Delhi, Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd. 2000, 196p

In this volume an attempt has been made to examine the demand and supply of female child labour at mind level. Child labour is a socio-economic problem and factors responsible are explained. The study is confined to urban female child labour of Agra city of Uttar Pradesh.

**RUDALI FROM FICTION TO PERFORMANCE** by Mahasweta Devi and Usha Ganguli, Calcutta, Seagull Books, 1999, 156p.

This powerful short story revolves around the life of Sanichari, a poor low caste village woman, a tale of exploitation and straggly written by Mahasweta Devi. She was also awarded the Padmasiri in 1986. Usha Ganguli adapted this into a play in 1992 which became the most acclaimed performance of its time,

Sevenhuijsen, Selma

**CITIZENSHIP AND THE ETHICS OF CARE;** Feminist considerations on justice, morality and politics. London, Routledge. 1998, 198p.

Why is it that the care for children, the old and the sick for times regarded as a female virtue and function? Has situation changed in recent years, and if so, what will this mean for women? Through out this book her feminist political theory is grounded in concrete examples of care.

Bathla, Sonia

**WOMEN, DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA;** Cultural and Political Representations in the Indian Press. New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1999, 209p

This book theorises the media coverage of women's movement in the Indian cultural context situated in the wider debates on women, democracy and the media.

Ross, Poole

**NATION AND IDENTITY.** London, Routledge, 1999, 209p

This will be essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the central place of nationalism and national identity in the modern world and in coming to terms with their transformation or displacement. Fascinating read for all interested in issues of national identity, both politically and philosophically.

Eagleton, Terry

**THE IDEA OF CULTURE.** New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000 156p

Culture is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language. Terry Eagleton's book focuses on discriminating different meanings of culture as a way of introducing to the general reader the Contemporary debates around it,



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## Video Film

"Plucking Pays" a video film in  
Sinhala, Tamil and English on Women  
and Rural Development produced by  
the Network of Sri Lanka Profession-  
als is available at WERC at Rs. 550/=

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CORDAID, our main funders, represented by Ms. Rademaker,  
Programme Officer and Mr. Mahuruf, Consultant for Cordaid in  
Sri Lanka, met WERC officers for a discussion, on April 6<sup>th</sup> 2001 at  
the WERC Auditorium.

Members of the WERC Board of Directors Dr. Kumari  
Jayawardena, Ms. Bernadeen Silva, Ms. Rocky Ariyaratne and the  
staff were present at the meeting.



Film show and the discussion on International Women's Day at  
WERC Auditorium

## Women's Education & Research Centre

58, Dharmarama Road,  
Colombo 6, Sri Lanka.  
Tel. 595296, Fax 596313